DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 585 EA 031 337

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TITLE	Getting Results with Accountability: Rating Schools, Assisting Schools, Improving Schools. Educational Benchmarks 2000 Series.
INSTITUTION	Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, GA.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	27p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Southern Regional Education Board, 592 10th St. NW, Atlanta, GA 30318 ($2.50 handling fee). Tel: 404-875-9211, ext. 236; e-mail publications@sreb.org. For full text: http://www.sreb.org/main/benchmarks2000/benchmarks2000.asp.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; *Accountability; Black Students; Comparative Analysis; *Competency Based Education; Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Norms; Public Schools; *Rating Scales; *School Effectiveness; School Restructuring; Standards; *Student Improvement

ABSTRACT

Every Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) state has taken actions aimed at holding schools accountable for improved student achievement. Several SREB states are recognized nationally as leaders in implementing school-accountability systems that are getting results. SREB states are making progress in improving student achievement on indicators such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and college admissions tests. Through accountability programs, some states are beginning to see evidence of closing the gap between the achievement of black and white students. It is now clear that state efforts to hold schools accountable for results and to provide schools with the necessary support are beginning to pay significant dividends. This report outlines for state leaders the basic considerations that are important in making ratings and assistance work as part of a state's comprehensive accountability system. Based on the experience of SREB states, it provides answers to these questions: What have SREB states done to improve student achievement at schools through accountability? What approaches are states using in the development of school-ratings systems? What are the essential characteristics of effective school ratings? What are states doing to assist low-performing schools? What assistance strategies lead to improvement at low-performing schools? and What can states do to ensure effective accountability, ratings systems, and improvements in low-performing schools? (DFR)

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ED 457 585

SREB

Getting Results With Accountability:

Rating Schools

Assisting Schools

Improving Schools

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EDUCATIONAL BENCHMARKS 2000 SERIES

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Goals for Education: Challenge 2000

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All children will be ready for first grade.

Student achievement for elementary and secondary students will be at national levels or higher.

The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.

90 percent of adults will have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Four of every five students entering college will be ready to begin college-level work.

Significant gains will be achieved in the mathematics, sciences and communications competencies of vocational education students.

The percentage of adults who have attended college or earned two-year, four-year and graduate degrees will be at the national averages or higher.

The quality and effectiveness of all colleges and universities will be regularly assessed, with particular emphasis on the performance of undergraduate students.

All institutions that prepare teachers will have effective teacher-education programs that place primary emphasis on the knowledge and performance of graduates.

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

Salaries for teachers and faculty will be competitive in the marketplace, will reach important benchmarks and will be linked to performance measures and standards.

States will maintain or increase the proportion of state tax dollars for schools and colleges while emphasizing funding aimed at raising quality and productivity.

The SREB Commission for Educational Quality, 1988

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ACCOUNTABILITY

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

Every SREB state has taken actions aimed at holding schools accountable for improved student achievement. Several SREB states are recognized nationally as leaders in implementing school accountability systems that are getting results.

SREB states are making progress in improving student achievement on indicators such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and college admissions tests. States with comprehensive approaches to school accountability are showing significant gains.

Accountability programs can increase the focus on the achievement of students who are academically behind their peers. Through accountability programs, some states are beginning to see evidence of closing the gap between the achievement of black students and white students. In many SREB states, more effort than ever before is being made to reach ***all*** children — no matter what their background.

SREB's *Getting Results: A Fresh Look at School Accountability* framed the basic elements of a sound accountability system as learned by state education officials. SREB states have shown that five elements — content and student achievement standards; testing; professional development; accountability reporting; and rewards, sanctions and targeted assistance — all are necessary parts of a comprehensive approach to school accountability that gets results in student achievement.

States also are learning that it is important how they define high- and low-performing schools and what assistance they provide to low-performing schools. Rating schools' effectiveness based on improving student achievement and reaching high standards over time is important for strong accountability programs. It is also important to provide low-performing schools with extra assistance and to reward exemplary schools.

It is now clear that state efforts to hold schools accountable for results and to provide schools with the necessary support are beginning to pay significant dividends. *Getting Results With Accountability: Rating Schools, Assisting Schools, Improving Schools* outlines for state leaders the basic considerations that are important in making ratings and assistance work as part of a state's comprehensive accountability system. Based on the experience of SREB states, it provides answers to these questions:

- **What have SREB states done to improve student achievement and schools through accountability?**
- **What approaches are states using in the development of school ratings systems?**
- **What are the essential characteristics of effective school ratings?**

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- **What are states doing to assist low-performing schools?**
- **What assistance strategies lead to improvements at low-performing schools?**
- **What can states do to ensure effective accountability, ratings systems and improvements in low-performing schools?**

Sound accountability systems can provide the link for the state, local district and individual school to reach challenging goals. Defining challenging standards for school performance, measuring and reporting progress, and providing incentives and extra assistance can help ***all*** schools become more effective.

Mark Musick
SREB President

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Getting Results With Accountability:

Rating Schools, Assisting Schools, Improving Schools

What have SREB states done to improve student achievement and schools through accountability?

In recent years there has been increasing pressure from policy-makers and the public to improve schools, "do accountability right" and show results in student achievement. The stakes are higher, and school accountability is front and center in SREB states' efforts to improve schools and raise student achievement.

Efforts to raise student achievement have been more consistent in some states than others, and some states have had considerable success. The SREB states that have had the most success with their accountability programs have "stayed the course" of continuous development and improvement.

States such as Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina and Texas have developed accountability programs by adding key elements while strengthening or modifying areas that already were established. These SREB states' accountability efforts have shown steady — and sometimes dramatic — improvement in raising student achievement as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

These four states also have kept the ongoing, bipartisan support of state policy-makers — sometimes amid transitions in state leadership or despite challenges and controversy. In response to criticisms of some aspects of the accountability program (especially the testing program), Kentucky modified its accountability program in 1998 but maintained the core elements. Midcourse corrections are absolutely necessary, because no state can get it right from the start. It is imperative to stay the course and make no U-turns.

Although West Virginia has not fully implemented all the key elements of an accountability program, the state's steady growth is reflected in National Assessment of Educational Progress results. Ongoing work to improve West Virginia's accountability program resulted in the creation of the Office of Education Performance Audits in 1998.

This report was prepared by Jim Watts, vice president for state services.

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Each of these states can show gains in student achievement and reductions in the gaps among the achievement levels of white students and minority students. More information on these gains can be found in the SREB Educational Benchmarks 2000 report *Student Achievement in SREB States.*

Every SREB state has taken actions for accountability. SREB states pushed in the mid-1990s to late 1990s to begin comprehensive accountability programs or make major changes to existing ones. States taking such actions included: Alabama in 1995; Delaware, Louisiana and Virginia in 1997; and Florida and Oklahoma in 1999.

Three states took important actions to get accountability programs back on track: Arkansas and South Carolina in 1999 and Georgia in 2000. These states' accountability efforts had begun in the 1980s and early 1990s, but, because of shifting state priorities and pressure from groups affected by the changes, the states did not continue to make improvements or "stay the course." These states now are incorporating lessons learned from those earlier efforts and from other SREB states' efforts into newly focused initiatives. For example, Georgia's A+ Education Reform Act of 2000 draws from lessons learned by SREB states that already include the major elements in their accountability programs.

Other SREB states' recent actions have focused on improving one or more aspects of the accountability programs. For example, Mississippi legislation in 2000 significantly shifted the accountability program's focus from school districts to schools. Also in 2000, Tennessee began an assistance program for low-performing schools as a part of school accountability.

Although no state has a perfect system, states with the best track records in improving student achievement all have exhibited a dogged persistence to refine their programs. States with effective programs identify and address weaknesses and build on strengths.

A senior state official in Texas advised: "Listen carefully to folks at the local level who are making the program work, and respond to their suggestions and concerns. Don't try doing anything flashy. Simply focus on making the program work."

States that have sustained their efforts to raise standards, improve accountability and provide additional resources have enjoyed increased support from local educators and the public. Many schools have benefited from accountability programs' focus on measuring results and giving assistance to schools that are struggling. When asked about assistance to low-performing schools as part of one state's accountability program, an official with the teachers organization said, "If it weren't for this program, these schools never would have gotten the help that they needed."

In *Getting Results: A Fresh Look at Accountability,* SREB identified five policy areas — content and student achievement standards; testing; professional development; accountability reporting; and rewards, sanctions and targeted assistance — that are essential parts of effective accountability systems. Each policy area contributes in a unique way to making accountability programs effective; none can stand alone. Experience shows that student achievement improves most in states that align all five areas. The slowest of these policy areas to develop has been rewards, sanctions and targeted assistance.

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Before schools can be rewarded for outstanding work or sanctioned for low performance in student achievement, states must develop fair, accurate ways to rate schools using reliable indicators of performance, such as results from state tests. Equally important is how states cooperate with local districts in assisting low-performing schools.

What approaches are states using in the development of school ratings systems?

State approaches to rating schools developed gradually. In the early years of most accountability programs, ratings were a relatively minor part of reporting results. School ratings now are among the most visible, pivotal elements of reporting on schools. In the 1990s, SREB published a series of reports (See page 24) that chronicled states' progress in school reporting and accountability.

By the late 1980s, most SREB states reported regularly on education indicators at the state and district levels. This focus on information about districts resulted from strong historical connections between states and local districts. State laws, rules and appropriations usually were directed toward districts. Because there was little direct contact between a state and individual schools, there was little effort to gauge what was happening on a school-by-school basis or to respond to situations at individual schools.

The early reports tended to be large volumes filled with details. They were neither as clear nor as useful as today's reports. Referring to these early reports, one legislator said, "I got a telephone book when what I wanted was a series of clear snapshots."

In an attempt to provide fairer comparisons, some states grouped districts or schools with similar demographic characteristics into categories or "clusters." Some of these so-called "fairer" groupings complicated the comparisons and made it difficult to explain results to parents and the public. These efforts sometimes suffered from technical flaws and comparisons that resulted in lower expectations for schools and districts with large percentages of students from low-income families.

States discovered another problem as they began to report on individual schools. Just as state averages do not reveal differences among districts, district averages do not reveal differences among schools. District results "hid" the results of individual schools — particularly low-performing schools — within districts. Common sense tells us that low-performing schools have to be identified before specific efforts can be made to help them, and accountability systems are based on this fact.

As SREB states' accountability programs matured in the 1990s, the focus began to shift from reporting on and changing districts to reporting on and changing individual schools and classrooms. In 1976, Florida became the first SREB state — and the first in the nation — to issue report cards on schools. By 1990, 11 of 16 SREB states issued school report cards. Although Arkansas provided for school report cards, implementation did not take place until later. **In 1998, all 16 SREB states required report cards on individual schools;** most had been improving and refining these report cards for nearly a decade.

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Table 1
Initial state action on school report cards

Alabama	1988
Arkansas	1989*
Delaware	1996
Florida	1976
Georgia	1988
Kentucky	1998
Louisiana	1988
Maryland	1989
Mississippi	1982*
North Carolina	1992
Oklahoma	1989
South Carolina	1977*
Tennessee	1992
Texas	1984
Virginia	1986
West Virginia	1988

* Implementation took place later.

Over time, school report cards have improved in clarity, accuracy and timeliness. Through SREB meetings in the 1990s, SREB states worked together to refine report cards and improve accountability. They learned significant lessons and identified essential characteristics of school report cards.

Effective report cards on schools:

- focus on student achievement and results;
- are useful for school improvement and accountability;
- are concise and understandable;
- provide timely and accurate information;
- show trends; and
- include data on groups of students within schools.

Used effectively, information from report cards has galvanized focus and involvement among principals, teachers, parents and students.

However, no state has a statewide comprehensive approach to training principals and teachers how best to use report cards and other achievement data for making decisions about school improvement.

States are establishing criteria and defining terms to rate schools

Several state initiatives in the 1990s led to more effective, focused uses of school report cards in making comparisons. Earlier comparisons among schools have evolved into more direct ratings systems based on achievement goals, standards or both.

Incorporating ratings into school report cards has brought student achievement and school improvement into the spotlight. Policymakers have given attention to helping low-performing schools improve. There is a new focus on content standards and quality testing, and an interest in professional development linked to getting results has emerged. Ratings also have resulted in rewards to schools that show improved student achievement and in sanctions and/or assistance to schools that show no progress or have declining student achievement.

All SREB states either rate schools or plan to do so soon. Most SREB states rate all schools, but Arkansas, Maryland, Oklahoma and Tennessee focus primarily on low-performing schools in their ratings systems.

Table 2
School ratings and criteria used for ratings

	First school year ratings assigned	Schools assigned ratings		Criteria used to rate schools			
		All schools	Low-performing schools	Test scores	Attendance	Graduation/ dropout rates	Other*
Alabama	1996	X		X			
Arkansas	2002		X	X	X	X	X
Delaware	2002	X		X			
Florida	1999	X		X	X	X	X
Georgia	2002	X		X	X	X	X
Kentucky	1994	X		X	X	X	X
Louisiana	2000	X		X	X	X	
Maryland	1995		X	X	X	X	
Mississippi	2004	X		X			
North Carolina	1997	X		X			X
Oklahoma	1990		X	X			
South Carolina	2002	X		X			
Tennessee	2000		X	X			X
Texas	1995	X		X	X	X	
Virginia	2000	X		X			
West Virginia	1984	X		X	X	X	X

* Examples of other factors are teacher qualifications and students' course-taking.

Most states base their accountability ratings on a few key indicators. The chief indicator is student achievement, as measured by state-administered tests. When calculating ratings, some states also take into account factors such as student attendance and dropout rates.

Ratings should be clear and easy to understand. Because words or symbols have a powerful impact on schools and communities, states need to consider carefully the terms used in ratings in order to avoid unintended consequences and mixed messages.

SREB states use more than 40 different terms to describe schools' performance, and the terms selected usually reflect the state's purpose for the ratings For example North Carolina and Kentucky use words that emphasize "growth." (See Table 3 on pages 14 and 15.)

Florida uses traditional letter grades of A, B, C, D and F for its ratings program. Alabama uses letter grades as part of ratings. Georgia plans to use letter grades. Delaware, Virginia and West Virginia give schools ratings that are variations of "accredited," derived from traditional systems of "certifying" school quality.

States need to make sure that the terms they use are easy for the public to understand. It can be a mistake to use terms that do not communicate clearly, are familiar primarily to educators or are intended for political purposes.

An additional problem arises if states use terms that are familiar to parents and the public in an entirely different context — not in rating schools as part of accountability programs. For example, many states have categories for high school athletic divisions — such as A, AA, AAA and AAAA — that are based entirely on size. A performance-based ratings system for school improvement would not want to use terms that could be confused with existing terms that serve a different purpose.

Another example is using the term "accredited" in a ratings program. Parents and the public generally understand accreditation to be an approval system based on schools' resources, such as qualifications of teachers; library holdings; student/teacher ratios; and number of support staff.

It is essential that states use clear terms and explain the ratings system to the public. State agencies and state officials have not done this job consistently well, and it may be useful to get help from outside sources or consultants. One senator said: "The biggest mistake that we made was not hiring a public relations firm. We were selling a 'product' [school improvement] and failed to do that well. Communication is so important."

States also need to pay attention to the scope of ratings systems. Ratings systems are designed to help bring about improvement *and* to reach an absolute standard of quality. States may have unnecessary problems with ratings systems that have only two categories (such as pass/fail or accredited/unaccredited) and don't have any categories to indicate *progress*.

Ratings systems should not completely replace traditional systems of accreditation (based on school resources); both systems serve a necessary purpose. However, when states move to ratings systems that are based primarily on results in improving student achievement, it is important that they give careful attention to striking an appropriate balance between the two types of systems and to communicating changes clearly to schools, parents and the public.

State approaches result in local action

One of the most important lessons learned about ratings in SREB states is that state and local actions regarding individual schools often profoundly affect not only the schools but also the communities they serve. While an "exemplary" rating is a point of community pride, a "low-performing" rating causes great concern. The result in both cases is that schools, students and parents focus on student achievement and the standards set by the state.

Ratings raise awareness, provide focus and energize schools and communities to work to improve student achievement. At their best, ratings can provide momentum, measure schools' progress and show parents, the public and policy-makers that schools can improve.

Including ratings in a state's accountability strategy helps schools focus on state content standards. If a school's ratings depend on student achievement, it becomes very important what the state determines that students should learn and be able to do in third grade or in a high school biology class. "Before accountability, our state standards often stayed in the shrink-wrap," said one state official. "What was being taught and learned varied from teacher to teacher. Rating schools based on whether or not children have learned what you set out to teach makes a difference."

Care must be taken to ensure that low-performing groups of students are identified and receive the attention necessary to help them succeed. Ratings systems, such as the one in Texas, that provide testing results for groups of students (such as by race or gender) can show whether groups of students within a school are learning. Monitoring the performance of individual groups of students has helped schools reduce gaps in achievement. A Texas state agency official said: "Requiring schools to move all groups of students up is the most powerful part of our accountability program. It helps ensure that no child is left behind." North Carolina is looking into the feasibility of reporting results by race and gender as part of its ratings system.

Ratings *assist* in school improvement. Ratings are a gauge, not a remedy. Ratings can begin discussions in schools about how to improve teaching and learning. Reports are more than simply a posting of results. They accomplish little if they do not lead to action and pursuit of performance goals.

Reports should be "working documents" and part of the school improvement process. Schools should use them to focus more on strategies and ways to improve results.

In order to improve, schools and groups of students that are behind need additional resources and assistance. Proven strategies — such as reducing class sizes, increasing instructional time in the core academic areas and improving teacher quality — all require reallocation of or additions to funding and staff.

Policy-makers and educators are eager to learn which schools succeed and why. SREB states are beginning to identify factors that lead to improvements or declines at schools. In order to find out what works in successful and improving schools, states first must establish accurate ways of assessing student achievement and measuring gains.

Ratings provide a basis for rewards and assistance. Rewards, sanctions and targeted assistance show that accountability programs are evolving. In the 1980s and early 1990s, SREB states passed sweeping measures providing for state sanctions and takeovers of local school districts. Only a few of these district-

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takeover laws were implemented. Even then, takeovers were used sparingly and for reasons of fiscal mismanagement by districts rather than for low levels of student achievement.

State policy-makers are beginning to understand that solutions must begin at the local level. State assistance aimed at helping schools understand how to sustain improvement has become a more common and effective strategy for turning around low-performing schools.

Solid ratings and accountability systems have enabled states to identify key factors that are common among high-performing schools. School ratings also affect schools in other ways. When requests for additional funding for education are questioned, showing improvement has helped build support. Ratings increasingly result in rewards to schools that improve student achievement significantly and in additional resources, oversight and assistance to those that are low-performing. (For more information on rewards and trends in teacher compensation, see the SREB *Educational Benchmarks 2000* series report *Teacher Salaries and State Priorities for Educational Quality — A Vital Link.*)

What are the essential characteristics of effective school ratings?

Effective school ratings give schools and communities the opportunity to track progress and compare their improvement and achievement with those of other schools and communities.

With school and community reputations riding on ratings, it is important that ratings are done well. States learned several lessons about school ratings while developing accountability systems.

Ratings should be clear and easy to understand. Terms have a powerful impact on schools and communities, and careful thought should be given to them. Unintended consequences and mixed messages can occur if terms are not chosen well. Ratings are for showing schools how well their students have achieved and how they are progressing. The words or symbols chosen for ratings should communicate this purpose clearly.

School ratings should be fair and consistent. Branding schools with symbols of failure may deepen attitudes of low expectations that contribute to poor performance. On the other hand, terms meant to soften the blow may be so indirect that they have little impact. Giving a school a false sense of security about student achievement is no favor to those involved.

Keeping accountability ratings stable is another important priority. Frequent changes in definitions, alterations in formulas used to calculate ratings or adjustments to correct errors can harm the credibility of schools and ratings systems. Although periodic adjustments are necessary to align with changes in state standards and testing, they should be kept to a minimum and staged in ways that help maintain stability and confidence. Schools and the public should be notified in advance of changes, which should be explained clearly to them.

School ratings should be accurate and credible. Because school ratings are used in making high-stakes decisions about rewards, sanctions and assistance, accuracy is essential. Mistakes in ratings have led to serious problems with credibility. If educators, the public

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Table 3
Selected school rating terms and most recent results

State	Selected terms used to rate schools	Number of schools	Percent of total schools
Alabama	Academic Clear	1,095	86%
	Academic Caution	88	7
	Academic Alert	91	7
Arkansas	High-priority, Alert, Low-performing, Academic Distress	Implementation in 2001-02	
Delaware	Superior Accreditation, Accredited, Accreditation Watch	Implementation in 2001-02	
Florida+	A	203	8%
	B	314	13
	C	1,236	51
	D	613	25
	F	78	3
Georgia+	A, B, C, D, F	Implementation in 2001-02	
Kentucky	Exceeding Goal, Meeting Goal, Progressing, Assistance	Implementation in 2001-02	
Louisiana+	Academic Excellence	1	–
	Academic Distinction	14	1%
	Academic Achievement	95	8
	Academically Above Average	524	44
	Academically Below Average	497	42
	Academically Unacceptable	57	5
Maryland	Reconstitution-eligible	96	7%
Mississippi	Superior-performing, Exemplary, Priority	Implementation in 2003-04	
North Carolina	Exemplary Growth	1,156	58%

	No Recognition	358	18
	Low-performing	13	1
Oklahoma*	Low-performing (first year)	42	3%
	Low-performing (second year)	5	–
	High-challenge	3	–
South Carolina+	Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, Unsatisfactory	Implementation in 2001-02	
Tennessee	To be announced	Implementation in 1999-2000	
Texas	Exemplary	1,120	18%
	Recognized	1,843	30
	Acceptable	3,147	51
	Low-performing	96	1
Virginia**	Fully accredited	118	7%
	Provisionally Accredited	955	53
	Accredited with Warning	718	40
	Accreditation Denied	–	–
West Virginia***	Full Accreditation	613	75%
	Temporary Accreditation	121	15
	Conditional Accreditation	76	9
	Seriously Impaired	8	1

+ Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and South Carolina assign separate growth ratings to schools. In Louisiana, first-year (baseline) scores for grades K-8 were calculated in fall 1999. First-year (baseline) scores for grades 9-12 will be calculated in fall 2001.

* In Oklahoma, performance ratings are listed for the 1998-99 school year for grades K-8 (source: Office of Accountability). Beginning in 1999-2000, student performance on tests will be labeled "advanced", "satisfactory", "limited knowledge" or "unsatisfactory." By November 2000, the state Department of Education must make recommendations to the Legislature for the identification of schools based on those four performance levels.

** Changes to Virginia's accreditation system are under review.

*** Legislation during the 2000 session in West Virginia added a fifth category, Exemplary Accreditation, to be applied to schools that substantially exceed the minimal performance levels set by the state.

and policy-makers perceive problems with the accuracy of ratings, the entire accountability program's integrity is questioned.

Most states have procedures for cross-checking information with local districts. Some state agencies may lack adequate staff to ensure the integrity and credibility of accountability programs. It is important to continue improving techniques for data collection and analysis.

Another issue related to ratings is maintaining credibility with the public. If too many schools are rated high or low, the public may question whether expectations are too high or too low. In determining performance levels for ratings, states carefully must consider the question "How good is good enough?"

The goal is to strike an appropriate balance between challenging expectations and reasonable expectations. **To develop credible ratings, states need to involve the public in determining that balance, explain it clearly and show progress.** If goals are too low, a school may not improve as much as it could. If goals are too high, there may be serious conflict and slow growth. In either extreme, the ratings' credibility suffers.

An illustration (see Figure 1) of the most recent school ratings from North Carolina, Texas and Virginia shows results from three different approaches. North Carolina heavily emphasizes increases or "growth" in performance. Texas uses an absolute standard that intentionally was set low initially and has been raised systematically each year. Virginia has set a standard (which is labeled "accreditation") that appears to be high and gives schools several years to achieve it.

High-performing schools face great pressure to maintain a standard of excellence, and low-performing schools face even greater pressure to improve. Attention also should be given to schools that remain for a long time in a middle category, where growth may be steady but slow. These schools may be good enough to avoid being classified as low-performing but not good enough to help students improve. These schools also need to focus on improving student achievement as much as possible. States should pay attention to improvement in all categories of schools.

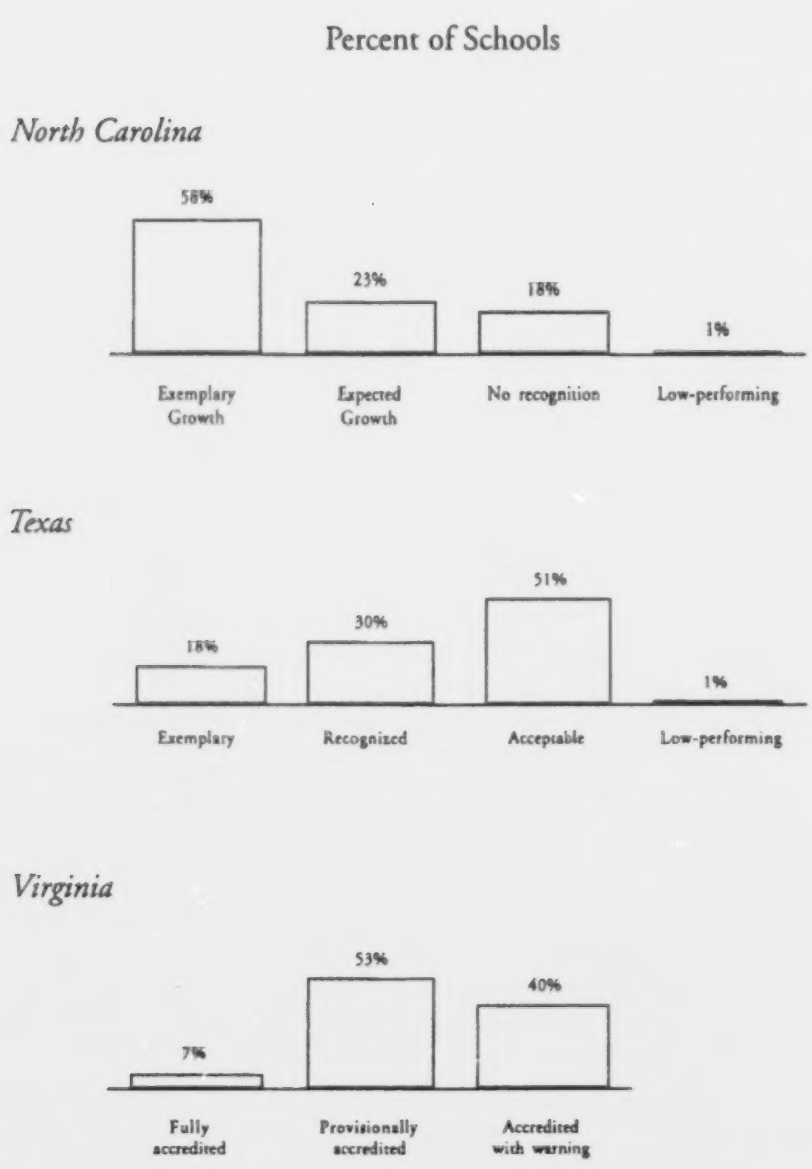
Ratings should use a balance of absolute standards and measures of improvement. School improvements take time, and accountability reporting should include information that helps schools track their progress in student achievement.

School ratings should be in "steps" based on student achievement that allow schools to move from one level to the next as they improve. This approach allows schools and communities to chart schools' progress.

Levels of ratings enable schools to improve in increments and help schools and the public to see trends over time and to respond appropriately. Schools and communities need to know that the initial ratings for schools are not permanent and that schools can improve their ratings.

States have learned from the mistakes they made in early efforts to rate schools. They made adjustments and "fine-tuned" terms to communicate more clearly with the public. For example, North Carolina's ratings system, which is weighted heavily toward improvement, initially used the term "exemplary" to describe schools in the top category of improvement. Because growth was the focus, some schools showed large enough gains to be rated "exemplary" but still had significant percentages of children performing below grade level. Some critics were quick to label these schools as "failing" — an equally inaccurate term.

Figure 1
Approaches to school ratings in three states



This figure illustrates the most recent school ratings from North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. Each uses a different approach. North Carolina heavily emphasizes growth. Texas uses an absolute standard that was raised year by year. Virginia has set a standard (labeled accreditation) that appears to be high and gives schools several years to achieve it.

North Carolina now carefully reports the schools rated in this top category as exemplary growth schools, which improves the usefulness of the ratings system.

Though measures for improvement are important, it also is necessary to set high standards of absolute performance. Parents and the public will support long-term efforts if they see reliable measures of progress and straightforward ratings based on challenging standards. Setting standards that are not challenging can slow the rate of progress. Balancing challenging and reasonable standards is difficult but vital to the success and credibility of school ratings and accountability programs.

What are states doing to assist low-performing schools?

As states rate schools, they recognize that identifying struggling schools is an important first step but not a solution. States and districts need to support these schools to help them improve student achievement. The challenge is finding practical, effective methods of assistance.

Effective assistance focuses on state standards and improvements in student achievement. Helping low-performing schools address and resolve their problems calls for a balance of intervention and assistance. Within the next four years, all SREB states plan to identify low-performing schools and most will provide schools with direct assistance.

Separate studies of school performance in North Carolina and Texas show similarities among low-performing schools: weak leadership, inexperienced teachers, low expectations for students, high turnover in faculty and a lack of focus on state content standards. These shortcomings did not "just happen" and will not correct themselves without intervention and extra assistance from districts and states.

In 1999-2000, Kentucky's Highly Skilled Educators program was funded at $6.2 million and served 66 schools with direct, intensive assistance. The Kentucky program began as the Distinguished Educators program as part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA). Strong support from policy-makers has made assistance to low-performing schools in Kentucky one of the most successful elements of KERA.

North Carolina's Assistance Team program provided 55 schools direct assistance with a total of more than $7 million in 1999-2000. The program is in its fourth year and continues to have strong support. North Carolina places assistance teams in schools that ask for help and in those that are required to have such help because of seriously declining performance.

Both programs have raised student achievement in the most challenging school settings. In Kentucky, 90 percent of the schools that receive assistance meet the goal of raising student achievement within two years. In North Carolina, 14 of 15 low-performing schools emerged from that status following their first year of assistance. Many schools have turned around because of collaborative efforts among Texas' Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA), universities and local districts.

The SREB *High Schools That Work* program also has a proven record of effective assistance to low-performing schools. In a recent study by the American Institutes for Research, *High Schools That Work* was recognized as one of

three comprehensive approaches to school reform that can document strong evidence of positive effects on student achievement.

Alabama is launching an extensive effort to intervene in schools placed on "academic alert" by the state. The South Carolina Education Accountability Act (1998) designated $3.6 million for assistance grants to low-performing schools and $19.6 million for class-size reductions in those schools. South Carolina will send assistance teams to low-performing schools in 2000-01.

Florida has focused on state assistance to low-performing schools since 1996, but legislation in 2000 makes it an even higher priority. Florida will offer salary stipends as high as $3,500 to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in low-performing schools. The state also appropriated $17 million for low-performing elementary schools (schools receiving D's or F's) to focus on improving reading achievement. Another $21 million will be directed to low-performing schools for improvement efforts determined by the local district.

West Virginia sent assistance teams to 24 low-performing schools in 1999-2000. Maryland's ongoing efforts to support and improve Baltimore schools are resulting in better test scores in the elementary grades. Tennessee plans to provide assistance to low-performing schools in 2000-01. In 1999, the Louisiana legislature appropriated $1.6 million for assistance. Virginia provided $4.2 million for assistance teams in the 2000-2002 biennium.

SREB states only recently began providing assistance to low-performing schools. In the early days, states commonly believed that simply publishing results would shame low-performing schools into improving. This strategy's effects were limited.

Attempts to impose serious sanctions on school districts often were met with resistance from local school officials and communities. Although Texas and West Virginia had some success with district takeovers, some takeovers have resulted in lengthy legal struggles with districts. Maryland is contracting with private management services to operate schools where student achievement consistently is low and does not improve; this strategy will be employed only as a last resort. Takeovers are difficult and remain rare in the SREB states.

States are searching for other strategies. Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma and Texas offer students who attend low-performing schools the option of transferring to other schools. These options usually include certain conditions. For example, transfers may be contingent on available spaces in the new schools or on the consent of the receiving districts.

In Florida, students attending an "F-rated" school have the option of state-funded tuition assistance to attend a private school. The Florida tuition program is the first state-wide program and potentially the largest of its kind. A Florida state circuit court has declared the program unconstitutional (Florida constitution); the state is appealing that ruling.

Few SREB states have focused enough energy and resources on developing comprehensive approaches to direct assistance to low-performing schools. Unfortunately, most states lack the experience or staff necessary to deliver effective assistance. States need to reorganize the work of state agencies and create a cadre of very experienced, highly skilled educators to deliver assistance.

What assistance strategies lead to improvements at low-performing schools?

Focus on improving student achievement. Low-performing schools are not focused on student achievement and how to raise student achievement. Getting schools to define their success based on raising student achievement is a critical change for many schools — and especially for low-performing schools. "All too often, low-performing schools are working on a little bit of everything and are not focused on anything," said one Kentucky state agency official. A thorough evaluation of student achievement in low-performing schools is an important first step for effective assistance.

Examining trends in student achievement, what courses students take, and school documents and records can point out a school's strengths and weaknesses. It is important to analyze and monitor trends in test data, attendance and dropout rates for different groups of students. It also is essential to help principals and teachers use data for planning improvements.

Setting high expectations for all students by eliminating coursework that is not challenging and teaching state content standards can achieve dramatic results. For example, it is important to match the school curriculum with the state's content standards and to ensure that classroom assessments are aligned with state testing methods.

After an assistance team has analyzed thoroughly student achievement at a school and identified its strengths and weaknesses, the team can build a practical plan that closely monitors student progress. The school's strengths and weaknesses can guide decisions about professional development, staffing, curriculum alignment, program development and school organization.

Use experienced, effective teachers and principals for assistance. Finding the right educators to work in assistance programs is essential. Kentucky and North Carolina invest much time and resources in screening and training candidates for their assistance programs.

Educators need special skills to assist low-performing schools. The director of one state program said: "This job is not for just anyone. To be effective, they need practical knowledge and a passion for the work. They have to have strong interpersonal skills, and that's hard to teach. We started with people who had those skills."

This job is best suited to those who have been successful in schools and classrooms that strive toward challenging standards. Teachers often excel in this role, largely because of their ability to communicate with their peers and their understanding of classroom challenges and instruction. Those who assist low-performing schools also need to be able to communicate effectively in order to balance their roles as outside evaluators and hands-on helpers.

In order to develop the special skills they need, educators who work in assistance programs need ongoing training as well as initial training. Effective programs also provide these educators with frequent opportunities to interact with other members of assistance teams.

Help principals and teachers in low-performing schools to help themselves. Low achievement ultimately must be solved classroom by classroom and school by school, with support from districts and states. Accordingly, principals and teachers who are charged with implementing the solutions need to acknowledge the problems. Although support from

states and districts is important, the primary responsibility and work are at the school level. Outside assistance often is needed to "kick-start" improvements in low-performing schools.

Long-term change requires principals and teachers to be properly prepared to focus on continued improvement. Ongoing professional development — based on a school's strengths and weaknesses and aligned with the state's standards and testing — is at the heart of effective change.

To develop a plan for professional development, a state must be aware of teachers' competencies. States need to address gaps in teachers' knowledge of the subjects that they teach. Professional development ought to be practical and suited to teachers' needs.

Assistance teams have found that teachers need a great deal of help. The director of one state agency said: "Many teachers in low-performing schools need a lot more help than we expected. Giving them that help takes time and is often hard work."

Recognize that each school requires support from the district and parents. Although many low-performing schools share similar characteristics, each is unique. The quality of the teachers and principal are important considerations. However, other factors — such as the roles of the school board, district staff and parents — also influence schools.

District leaders need to be involved. One state director of school improvement pointed out that "you need the direct involvement of district staff. They make important decisions about resources and personnel that are crucial in turning a school around. Without their help, it can be a much more difficult job."

Lack of parental involvement and public apathy are not unusual in communities with low expectations. Strategies to promote parental involvement and change negative attitudes toward schools are essential. After the members of a state assistance team leave, it will be more difficult to focus on improvement if there is no ongoing support from parents and district staff.

Provide adequate time and resources. It takes time to raise expectations, improve teacher knowledge and teaching, and change schools' negative practices. Aligning the curriculum with state standards and other short-term efforts can pay quick benefits in improved student achievement, but these efforts must be sustained. No one should become complacent if student achievement scores improve significantly in the first year or two. Continued improvement requires deeper changes beyond assistance and initial fixes.

One member of an assistance team described the team's job as helping "faculty and students understand how to improve and keep improving. In the end, this is their work long after we have left." Lasting change requires altering long-standing teaching practices and school operations; reversing these practices takes time and support.

Quality professional development is not common in low-performing schools; these schools need professional development that focuses on what is taught and how to teach it. High-quality, ongoing professional development that addresses a school's shortcomings is important and requires resources.

Many low-performing schools have inadequate resources or do not make good use of the resources they have. A key part of assistance is helping schools to use existing resources care-

fully and to focus additional resources where they can have the greatest effect.

Priorities include improving teaching and reducing class sizes for children who are not meeting performance standards and for those who have fallen behind. Also, children who are behind need additional time (such as after-school programs) to catch up. These priorities require reallocating resources *and* adding resources.

What can states do to ensure effective accountability, ratings systems and improvements in low-performing schools?

The SREB region clearly has led the nation in implementing effective accountability systems for schools. States are making progress, as measured by several indicators — including independent measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and college admissions tests.

All 16 SREB states have programs that address parts of the five major elements of a sound accountability program: content standards and student achievement standards; testing; professional development; reporting; and rewards, sanctions and targeted assistance. No state has perfected an accountability system. The quality of each element must be a high priority, and states need to ensure that each element is aligned with the others to work as a system.

In order to ensure effective accountability, school ratings and improvements in low-performing schools, state leaders need to take several actions:

- Stay the course.

States that have the most success with their accountability programs have stayed the course while continuing to develop and improve their programs. Midcourse corrections are vital. No state gets it right immediately, and efforts may "drift." Key elements of the program must be strengthened and modified as needed.

- Focus on results and resources.

A focus on results helps states determine where to focus existing and new resources. Incorporating accountability for student achievement into decisions about resource allocations is not only good public policy but also good evidence of the need for additional resources.

- Continue to improve reporting.

All 16 SREB states require school-level report cards focused on progress in student achievement. Most states have been refining them for nearly a decade, but a lot of work remains. Schools are just beginning to use data from these reports to drive decisions about school improvement and professional development. Principals and teachers need help in understanding how to use data from report cards effectively.

- Make ratings clear and easy to understand.

Words and symbols used in ratings have a powerful impact on schools and communities. They should be clear and understandable, and they need to be linked directly to improving student achievement and schools. All too often, terms used do not reflect the ratings' primary intent. States need to make changes that are necessary for clear communication with schools, principals, teachers, parents and students.

- **Make ratings be signals of progress toward challenging standards.**

Balancing the mutual goals of making progress and meeting challenging standards in school accountability has proven to be difficult but necessary. A focus on improvement "levels the playing field" and forces all schools to look carefully at which students are progressing. Even the highest-performing school can make progress. The ultimate goal, however, is for all students to be challenged by high expectations.

- **Ensure that ratings are accurate and credible.**

Accuracy is essential. Mistakes in ratings can lead to serious problems with the system's credibility. Every state must provide adequate staff, measures for cross-checking information and assurance of the ratings system's integrity. Policy-makers need to provide adequate resources and independent oversight to ensure that the job is done well.

- **Address key issues in low-performing schools.**

Low-performing schools commonly have weak principals, inexperienced and poorly qualified teachers, high faculty turnover, low expectations for students and a lack of focus on content standards. These difficult problems require direct strategies by states and districts. For example, states can provide highly qualified educators with incentives to work in low-performing schools.

- **Provide effective assistance to low-performing schools.**

SREB states only now are beginning to provide assistance to low-performing schools, and too few resources have been directed toward these efforts. However, when efforts have been made to help these schools, the results in student achievement have been promising and effective approaches have been developed.

Punitive sanctions are needed as a last resort but should not be the focus of efforts to improve low-performing schools. Effective assistance focuses on improving student achievement with the help of experienced educators and on getting parents and the local district more involved in school reform. The ultimate goal is for schools to continue to improve student achievement without intervention from the district or the state.

- **Provide adequate time and resources.**

It takes time to reverse long-established patterns of low expectations, to improve teachers' knowledge and instructional skills, and to change negative practices at schools.

It is important that existing and new resources be used effectively to support long-term improvement at low-performing schools. Top priorities include funds to reduce class sizes for children who have fallen behind and to increase instructional time by extending the school day, school week and school year. Student achievement and schools can improve through effective professional development and incentives to place and retain high-quality teachers in low-performing schools.

Accountability will remain a priority for policy-makers in SREB states. The Southern Regional Education Board will continue to support states' accountability efforts; to meet with policy-makers and their staffs and with staff members from state agencies; to share information and strategies; and to work toward solutions for common problems.

Other SREB Publications on School Accountability

Getting Results: A Fresh Look at School Accountability (1998)

Accountability in the 1990s: Holding Schools Responsible for Student Achievement (1997)

Linking Education Report Cards and Local School Improvement (1995)

School Accountability Reports: Lessons Learned in SREB States (1992)

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